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Once, They Had Been Friends

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He recognized the brightness of her almond-shaped eyes almost immediately, just as luminous as they ever were beneath the darkness of her eyebrows and a complexion that seemed to him, even years ago, to be Polynesian.

The two of them grew up together in a Midwestern town of perfect Aryans, where her skin's natural darkness seemed an aberration. His uncle, a minister, once preached in his church on a Sunday when she sang a solo. Later, over dinner, he asked if that remarkable young lady who'd offered the ministry in music were adopted.

He claimed he recognized the old Alyda shining through the changes left by the twenty-some years, but at first glance he hesitated speaking because he said he needs to rehearse what might happen in that kind of accidental meeting, time to prepare a conversation.

Outside the McDonalds where they'd both stopped, the snow gave no sign of letting up. He'd taken the Port Washington exit, exhausted by having to drive so slowly on the single path up the interstate—twenty miles an hour, at best. In good weather he would have been home in less than an hour. Already the ditches were littered with the cars.

She was reading *USA Today*, sitting alone in a booth. He caught her profile first, and then that memorable face when she folded the paper to pick up her coffee. Her hair was cut short, frizzed and brightened, the skin on her neck wrinkled, her face somewhat lined, he said. Long, dangling earrings. Matching necklaces—several. Rings—three or four. Half-glasses on a thin, gold chain.

He said he was closer to her than anyone else in his high school class had been—academically, at least. They had been friends. Sexually, he said, he had represented no threat to her then because somewhere in sixth grade she was already a woman, towering over the others and attracting older boys. He was a late-bloomer.

I'm avoiding what happened. My husband and I are alone in a resort cottage, a place we've been to before because the place belongs to a member of our church. He is standing, his hands folded at his waist when he's telling me what happened in that storm. He's not pacing. I'm sitting in an overstuffed chair. Over his head, when I look at him, I see this deer's head, full of misshapen antlers.

He says he backed away from Alyda Vander Linden because he didn't know what he would say to her—my husband, the editor of the magazine that serves the denomination both of them grew up in and she grew away from to become Lee Linden, sometime Hollywood actress and director, a woman who had been, at last report, well on her way to her fourth husband.

Years ago, she had married some Easton boy when both of them were no more than a year out of high school, a sweet guy—co-captain of this, king of that. Several years later, when he had become head coach of a high school team in a Twin Cities suburb, she walked out on him and started acting in local theater, had

even taken some significant parts at the Guthrie. His mother had told him the Easton version of what happened. "Take the g— d— kids," she'd screamed, shouldering her bag. That was the story at least.

When he saw her in that McDonalds, he said he felt as if something was wrong with him for not being able, simply, to greet her, as if he were afraid. Maybe he was. Maybe he should have been.

The snowmobilers came in, kicking the snow off their boots, to announce they'd lead the stranded travelers to the fire station, just a few blocks away, where the town was prepared to deal with the growing numbers who'd quit the interstate. The street was still clear, they claimed, but the storm was going to worsen and McDonalds was already full.

People got to their feet, pulled on hats and coats, and buttoned themselves up against the storm. Lee Linden pulled on her coat—it looked like fur—snugged it up around her neck, slipped on her gloves, then reached for her newspaper and stuck it under her arm before pulling her purse over her shoulder. He watched all of this. She was dressed in black, from the turtleneck to the billowing slacks to the thick coat.

When all of the travelers started to leave, he stood, adjusted his scarf, pulled his coat up around his neck, and started moving toward her, hoping she would simply stumble over him. She pulled on a black headband and a pair of gloves, then bent over to retrieve some toy for a child who was up over the shoulder of the man in front of her.

They were thirty feet from each other, people all around, he said, when her eyes looked past him without taking a moment's notice. Then, suddenly, her face jumped, and she took another look. He smiled. "How are you?" he said, mouthing the words hugely across the noise and the people.

She winked. "Do you have a car?" she said when they were close enough to hear each other. "Drive me, will you? It's been years since I've been on snow. I'm scared stiff." That's what she said.

"It's not going to quit," he told her, thumbing at the windows.

"I'm so happy you're here," she told him.

He said he reached for her hand when they were close enough. Both of them knew that if they were going to be stranded, at least they'd be with someone they knew —that's what prompted the hug, he said.

"Where's your family?" she asked.

"My wife's with her parents," he said. "The kids are gone, and both our parents are getting older. We decided this Thanksgiving we'd just cover both places."

There was no need for both of them to drive to the fire station, he said. They skated across the parking lot together, him holding her arm. It was a blizzard and it was foolish for him to usher her around the other side of the car, but once they got inside she stayed beside him. "It's okay to snuggle, isn't it—I mean, at our age?— she said. I'm freezing."

It was only late November.

"So how are you?" she said, slipping her hand through his arm. "My word,

Mark, it's been years, and I always liked you, always respected you. Are the kids grown?"

He told her yes, told her he was editing the denominational magazine.

"Standard Bearer?" she said.

"New name," he said, "flashier now—Alive."

"Alive?" she said. "No kidding?"

"And you?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away. "I'm cutting back," she said. "Maybe I should say I was cut back. I'm still writing, working almost as much as I'd want to." She'd worked as an actress, of course, done some directing, received about as much acclaim as she'd ever hoped to, she told him. "There's not that many good parts for a woman my age," she said.

"You made it big," he told her.

"Don't patronize," she said. "I know very well what you think of people like me. I was one of you once," she said. That was all. Then she pulled herself closer and squeezed his arm. "I couldn't have dreamed this could happen, Mark," she went on, "you and me in this storm, an hour away from the town where we grew up. It's a movie is what it is."

Even in town it was snowing hard.

"I remember this town," she told him. "There's this big Catholic church right up here somewhere on the hill."

"Huge," he said. "My father used to say that after all those steps some people took, when they'd get to the top, it was too bad it was only a Catholic church."

"That's terrible—do people still say things like that?" she said. "I used to." She looked for the cathedral through the snow. "Wasn't it Marx who used to say 'Give me the kids up to eight-years-old or something, and I'll have them for life'?" She shook her head. "Christianity and Marxism—just a different catechism."

"Eight years old?" he said.

"'Train up a child in the way he should go, and he will not depart," she told him. She pointed out the window. "What we ought to do," she said, "is walk up those stairs for ourselves right now—penance for all that God-awful bigotry." She still had her arm in his. "Pull over," she said. "We can always find the fire station in this burg."

So he did, not because she said to, but because he thought she didn't expect he would. It was something of a dare, and he didn't want to be afraid, he said, so he stopped the car and turned around into the back seat and grabbed a stocking cap. "What do you need?—gloves?" he said. "I've even got boots back here."

"That is so Midwest," she said. "You've got extra gloves in the cubby-hole, I bet," she said. "I've forgotten so much. This is all so great—thank the Lord for the blizzard."

He grabbed a snow-covered handrail, and she kept hold of his arm all the way up, he said. She slipped now and then, tugging at him to keep herself upright because she wore her heels in that heavy snow.

As my husband is telling me this whole story, he's standing up and I'm sitting

down. Maybe I said that already. It is difficult for him to look at me, and me, him. I don't know where it's going, and I do. It's a blizzard. They're walking up the steps to a cathedral in a city on the lakeshore.

"I'm glad we're getting there," she said, nearly to the top. "I'm dying."

He thought of that as a kind of opening, my husband the preacher. "That's the right first step," he said.

"Dying?" she asked.

"I thought you remembered your catechism," he told her.

What he said—it was supposed to be something of a joke. He thought it might create a way for them to talk about things, he said. He means, talk about faith.

His first impulse on getting inside the cathedral was to make some joke about votive candles and vaulted ceilings, because he thought she might. But she didn't. There could have been a priest in a garret somewhere, but the two of them were all alone in the immense silence, he said, the blizzard left to curl up somewhere on that stairway outside.

She shook the snow from her hair and pulled a brush from a pocket and looked around. "It's been so long," she said. "It's beautiful. The whole place is staged perfectly to make you feel God." She looked up at him. "You're surprised to hear me say that, aren't you? You think of me as some sluttish Hollywood vixen—"

"That's not true," he said.

"Oh, bullshit," she told him. "Some people memorize every line from *The Wizard of Oz*—me, I've got old-time religion playing in me forever. I know how you people think."

He told her that he didn't judge her.

"That really means, 'God does,' which is a helluva lot worse," she told him. "You can't fool me, preacher-boy—you're in it up to your ears."

He told her he'd opt for the blizzard if she were going to have him for lunch.

"That's a lie," she told him. "There's ninety-nine good souls safe in the fold, but I'm the one in the storm. You aren't leaving." She brushed off what was left of the snow, then looked around. "Even five years ago—" she laughed, "—maybe I'd better not say it—"

"Go ahead," he said.

"Not that long ago," she told him, "I would have had you for lunch." That's what she told him, right there in the church. She'd have done it for adventure. That's what she said. "I'd have you for my sins," she told him, "right here, right now, in some back corner. What a heavenly bargain." She brushed the snow off his shoulders, then took his hand, and the two of them walked up the center aisle. "Maybe five years ago," she told him. "Ten—for sure. Ten years ago I wouldn't have even thought about it."

"You're retired from all of that?" he said.

"Weary," she told him. "Sex really isn't sexy—it's all politics. You get sullied, you know—your heart gets grainy like sand." She took a hold of his arm. "You've been in heaven most of your life, I bet?"

He said that annoyed him.

"Will you hear my confession, Father?" she said.

He told her he wasn't her priest.

"'In Adam's fall, we sinned all,'" she said. She looked away, then suddenly back at him, sharply, as if she were measuring him. "Sometimes I think I screwed my life up royally."

The two of them are in this cathedral in the middle of a blizzard—my husband and this woman from Hollywood. Once, they had been friends.

He said he tried to go easy. He said something like, "I know you've had problems—"

"Don't bullshit me," she said. "Not 'had some problems'—as if I lost an earring. I want you to be Reverend Mark Vellinga," she told him. "I want you to stand for something. Tell me I messed up."

"I'm not God," he told her, "and I'm not your rotten childhood either."

"It wasn't rotten," she said, and then he thought something in her broke. "Maybe I'm the rotten one," she said. "Maybe I did it all wrong. Right from the start."

She seemed perfectly serious, so he took her in his arms and she pushed her face into his shoulder, then quickly backed away. "You know, you're hardly apostolic," she told him. "A real Christian would have spit me out long ago. You've been had for almost an hour already."

"I've been had?" he said.

"This ain't no fire station—"

"We're in church," he told her.

"And you're with the whore of Babylon." That's what she told him.

"I didn't say that," he said.

"It's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"That's not true," he said.

"What do you think—I mean, of me?" she said.

He said he didn't know what to say. He said he knew the right answer—love. "It's always the right answer, right, Jen?" he asked me. But saying that didn't seem right. "I love you"—that's what he thought he should say, but he couldn't. "To me, you're still Alyda," he told her.

"I haven't been Alyda for 25 years—no, thirty," she told him. She started walking back up the aisle. "Let's get out of here," she said. "Let's go sit in a fire engine."

She was, he says, mercurial, intense, trying, even difficult. What he didn't tell me, I suppose, is that she was, and is, beautiful. Last night, after he told me all of this, I went to a video store, thinking maybe I could find her on the jacket of a film—you know, just see her, even though I didn't want to.

Anyway, then he told her this: "You've done it all—I really envy you."

That hurt me badly. "And then what?" I said.

She told him she envied him—envied, really, what he stood for. Once again he took her in his arms, not drawn by desire but friendship, old friendship.

He wanted me to see it that way—they were old friends.

Not once in the whole story did my husband claim innocence. Not once did he ask for pity. He told me every last thing that happened because—because why? Because he thought it was the only way that night might leave him.

He told her he had no desire to spend the rest of whatever time the two of them would have together at some fire station port-in-the-storm overrun with stranded travelers. He told me it was his idea to walk back into the storm and across the street, where he remembered big houses. It was his idea to ask to be put up.

"Like Joseph and Mary," she told my husband.

"You're not pregnant," he told her.

"We'll see about that," she said, laughing. "You know, I'm not as heathen as you think," she told him, and she reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his stocking cap. "I need something for my head," she said. "You've got nothing to get wet up there anyway."

The wind had picked up outside, he said. There were no cars on the street. The house they picked was big, a Victorian thing, straight across the street from the church.

A woman in a housecoat met them at the ancient front door. There they stood, a slant of light widening over a bald man and a beautiful woman in a gray stocking cap, and the old woman didn't know what to say. Ms. Linden looked at him right away as if to suggest that she was a demure housewife looking to her man to begin conversation, so he did. He told the woman they were travelers, that they'd come off the interstate, that even though they'd made it into town, the snow was ferocious, and rather than spend all night looking around in a town that seemed completely shut down, they'd parked the car along the street and decided to take their chances with local folks.

Like Mary and Joseph.

"We were on our way to Door County," Ms. Linden said.

"Door County?" the old woman said, her smile brightening. "You have relatives there?"

"My husband's parents," Ms. Linden told her, and just like that—with that lie—the old woman pronounced them man and wife. He didn't try to dissuade her either, because he was scared of making that old woman afraid.

The moment she removed her coat, Alyda apologized for her fancy dress. They had plenty of winter clothes up north, she said—all their ski clothes. They had come from dinner—something about his job—and it had been her fault for their starting out, her husband—she grinned sheepishly at him—insisting that every weather forecaster had said no one should go up north into Wisconsin. It was her fault, she said, because she couldn't bear to sit home alone on Thanksgiving, the kids not coming back, all of them already committed to their in-laws, but the trip up north wasn't really that bad either because the two of them hardly ever had a chance to get away, she said, and this was a wonderful long weekend, almost like another honeymoon. Once again, she slipped her hand into my husband's arm.

Almost immediately this old woman produced a Christmas cardigan that Ms. Linden happily threw over her shoulders. The woman's children, two of them at least, were there—and their children—gradeschoolers—very well behaved. Chicago people themselves, Elmhurst, my husband said. They talked politics for awhile, crime, the Daleys, swapped urban nightmare tales.

Of that conversation he said he doesn't remember much because he was on edge from constantly perpetuating the lie. Yet there were moments he really enjoyed this game, this drama they were creating—that's what he told me, guiltily.

Eventually it was Ms. Linden who offered the signal—a yawn—that she wanted no more of the little game. Their host spotted that yawn, suggested that they must be tired, offered them an upstairs bedroom and a nightcap, some sherry, then told them they'd find towels in the closet across the hall and to use whatever they'd need. It was a big house.

He went to the vestibule to retrieve his coat because his suitcase was in the car, after all, and he told them he wanted to check the weather. Maybe they could get out. Maybe the whole thing was only lake snow.

The old woman said if he could get in the driveway, it might be preferable to park the car there, since if the storm passed by morning, the street crews would rather have it off Main. So he went out by himself, he said, but the snow seemed sharper, more stinging, the wind having changed—it was northwest now.

At every step, with each deception, he said he knew where this was moving. Alone, outside, the storm still raging hard enough to stop him from simply starting the car, plowing back to the interstate, and going home, he remembered a fire station that could have rescued him. "I had options," he told me, looking, for once, directly into my eyes.

He backed the car up carefully, then swung it into and through the drifts that had filled in the thin driveway on the north side of the house. He parked, opened the trunk, and when he looked inside he saw the shovel. That stopped him. It was unexpected. I'd put it there. He told himself this little game had gone far enough and he could stop it. He told himself he was in control. He reminded himself he was old, not some hot-blooded kid.

Then he stopped talking, stopped telling me what happened. We're sitting there in this lakeside cottage, my husband and I, and he stopped. He didn't say a word for maybe a minute, and then, slowly, he went on.

He said he didn't want to be the preacher, not the repressed, Puritanical caricature that was there in her mind. He fought with what she wanted to make him, he said. He grabbed the suitcase and shut the trunk, went back and stood on the front porch, watching the old woman through the front window as she moved about living room, picking up the dishes. Right then he thought long and hard, but did not resolve himself to anything, nor did he pray. Thinking back, he said, the fact that he didn't pray right then—or couldn't—is something he regrets.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside, put down the suitcase, removed his shoes, and walked away in his socks, feeling a nervous pinch from the fiction they'd created, from the fact that his overnight bag—a single suitcase—might well

have seemed, to people who were questioning, a bit meager for the two of them, especially the way Ms. Linden was dressed.

No one said a thing. He made his way up to the bedroom and found her there, the lights on, sitting at the edge of the bed, the lady's Christmas cardigan still over her shoulders.

"I live in a place where all of this is supposed to be out in the open," she told him, flipping closed a magazine she'd been paging through. "Before we start whatever it is we'll do, we spell out ground rules."

He said he put the suitcase down on the bed beside her, opened it, and pulled out some jogging clothes. "You wear these," he said. "How about that for rule number one?"

"You're avoiding the question," she said, and then, "I want you to know that what you think about this is important to me because I can come out of this in much less pain than you can. I respect you, Mark," she told him. "To me, you're quite a trophy. At least you live for something."

"You don't?" he said. He told me he pulled out a sweatshirt for himself.

"No," she said, "I don't. It's that simple."

He put the suitcase on the floor and sat beside her. "Is that regret?" he said.

"It's the truth," she told him. "You know, it's really as Godless a world as our Sunday School teachers used to say." She shrugged her shoulders. "But at least I can tell the truth. You can't."

He stopped again right then. I'm still sitting in the chair, still as stone. "All I can do is tell you the story, Jen," he said. "If I try to explain, I only compound my own—"

"My own what?" I said.

"Shame," he told me.

I told him to go on.

He said he had a question for her. "Tell me something," he said. "What is it that motivates you?" he said. "What gets you up in the morning? Is it the perfect execution of a film, writing something well, is it just personal enrichment—"

"Personal enrichment," she said, "my god!"

"Calvin says we make our own gods."

"John Calvin?" she said. "I got friends who will love this—I'm about to sleep with a man who quotes John Calvin."

At that moment, for the first time, he disliked her, he said. He told her he was sleeping on the floor.

"Always the gentleman," she told him. "Always the saint."

He thought about pulling on his sweatshirt in the bathroom down the hall, but he didn't want to show any weakness so he stood right in front of her, took off his sweater, put on the sweatshirt, unzipped his trousers, dropped them to the floor, stepped out, walked to the closet to grab the extra blankets, slipped two out, took out a pillow, and lay everything on the floor.

"You're sweet, you know that?" she told him. "You're such a child. You're angry now aren't you—angry and defiant?"

That cut him. He folded his pants in his hands. He didn't want to be self-righteous.

"I feel like Eve," she said. "I've long ago taken a bite. I'm already soiled, so I start hunting down the only playmate in sight." And then she said, "Feminists have it all wrong—we're the ones with all the power." Then she got going on Eve. "She takes a look at this sweet bare-naked little boy and she's got the apple in her hand—one big bite already taken—and she turns away, wondering if maybe there's some bigger game, you know?"

"I'm all you got," he told her.

"She doesn't have to pull down her sun dress because she isn't wearing one." she said. "What am I telling you for?—you know the story. It's so long since I stopped believing all of that, that it's hard for me to remember why."

"It probably became irrelevant," he said.

She told him that he might be right about that. And then she said, "But it isn't, is it? Here you stand in front of me like some revelation, the two of us thrown together in a blizzard. You're an angel or something. You are. These things don't just happen, Mark—there, see? I can't get it out of me completely, Mark, this sense that there's a God."

"Bring up a child in the way she should go," he said.

"I mean when the dust settles, it's not irrelevant at all," she told him, "this business of meaning and peace, of glory and damnation."

"The world of Calvin," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Your world. Maybe I've been wrong. Maybe you're the one with the power and I've just been fighting it for far too long."

When he told me that—when my husband told me how she'd said what she did—I knew how it would be that she finally would take him. It wouldn't be as a vixen, but a sinner. "And she cried, I suppose?" I said.

"No," he said. "She looked at me as if I was the last thing left for her on earth. She looked at me as if she needed me." And then he turned away. He brought his hands up to his face. "I convinced myself that she needed me," he said. "That's what did it. What kind of arrogance is that, anyway? For her. I told myself I was doing it for her."

And then, after all of that, "I'm sorry, Jen," he said. "Oh, God, I'm sorry." He leaned his head back as if he were looking up to the ceiling.

That's what he said last night, when he told me everything, every last thing, more than I now care to know.

And then he left, just as he said he would. He'd taken me to this cottage and told me the whole story, just the two of us. And then he told me he was going to a motel because he wanted to give me some time alone. He took the car, and he said something that made me want to scream. He said he was going to call the kids because he'd have to tell them too.

I told him he'd do no such thing.

For a moment he had nothing to say. Then he told me he wanted me to call him when, and if, I wanted to speak to him again. He said he was perfectly willing to drive back to Chicago or get some friends to pick him up if I wanted to stay here alone and I needed a car—or if I wanted to go somewhere else, my sister's or something.

It's December, three weeks from Christmas. That was yesterday, all of that—last night. Today, I'm here alone.

Last night I walked through a little video store a few blocks up. It was cold but not windy, the night clear and deathly still, almost horrifying in places where the moon shown through the stark black branches of the trees.

I walked into the store and wandered through the aisles. I kept seeing her on stage in front of me, perfect lips and skin. I don't know why I needed the video jacket. I know exactly what she looked like. He told me everything.

Four men were in that store. Who knows?—deer hunters maybe. When I walked by them, I snatched some sexual stuff up from a hot tub of revenge in me, some urges I thought I'd long ago left behind. I too am closing in on fifty, but just for a moment I saw those men—all of them—as partners. I walked by them, thinking that maybe for the first time in my life—me and all four of them, a whole scene I'd never even imagined before. I saw those bearded men as if they were—how do we say it?—sex objects.

But this is what happened: they didn't even see me, didn't even know I was there. Had I really offered, they wouldn't have wanted me anyway.

I hurt so badly that I told myself I probably couldn't blame my husband for wanting to live and breathe and feel life within him. Maybe I couldn't blame him for not wanting to go gently into death, where it seems I'm bound.

Besides, how many husbands have done what he has?—quit his job, told his wife every last thing and taken on the blame himself, never a contrary word about Ms. Linden. How many have done that?

Men have lied for centuries. I know women who've kept their own secrets. And here I am in some nameless resort town, alone, the unfeeling cold waiting like a stalker outside the door and my husband of 25 years wants me to call him. He's praying for it, I'm sure.

There's a patio out back of this cottage, covered with two feet of perfectly untouched snow. It covers a backyard that runs to the lakefront, an unmarked blanket of snow except for a nearly indistinguishable hole, little more than a shadow this morning on the slope that runs from the side of the house. Somewhere down there, a video is buried. Last night, I threw it as far as I could, which is not far. This morning a hundred people could stand here at the patio doors and see nothing but a winter lakeshore postcard. I'm the only one who knows what's buried. This morning, against a perfect blue sky, the new snow shines like a carpet of glass.

I believe in forgiveness. I believe in grace. And I know that you will forgive my husband. I know you will even forget. You are my oldest friend. You're all I have right now, but I know you'll forgive him because I know you.

But you are God, and I am not.

And I can't. I just can't. I'm sorry.

This story first appeared in *The Other Side* in January 2000.